

A Human Rights Lens on Full Employment and Decent Work in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda

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Abstract

On September 25, 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the blueprint for a global partnership for peace, development, and human rights for the period 2016 to 2030. The 2030 agenda follows on the heels of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 2001, which set the international development agenda for the period 2001 to 2015. This article uses a human rights lens to demonstrate that the MDGs and the SDGs have not addressed full employment and decent work in a manner that is consistent with the Decent Work Agenda of the International Labour Organization and international human rights legal obligations of the UN member countries. It concludes that the new 2030 development agenda sadly aligns with market-based economic growth strategies rather than the realization of the human rights to full employment and decent work for all.

Keywords

decent work, international development, human rights, International Labor Organization, sustainable development goals

Introduction

This year the United Nations embarks on a new plan to eliminate global poverty. For almost 100 years, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the UN specialized agency on work, has focused on eliminating poverty and improving the lives of workers and their families. The ILO (2001) has long recognized that “the best way to avoid a life of poverty is to find decent work” (para. 32). Indeed, work is instrumentally valuable as a means to gain income to meet needs for food, clothing, housing, education, and health care. Work is also intrinsically valuable as it provides opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills, form friendships, integrate into the community, and achieve self-realization (Gross, 2010; United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2015). Studies indicate that unemployment causes loss of self-confidence, poor health, disruption of family and social relations, and social exclusion, and has also been associated with suicides, imprisonment, alcoholism, drug addiction, and child abuse (Gross, 2010; Sen, 1999). Not all work, however, contributes positively to human development. Many jobs do not pay enough to meet basic needs (Gross, 2010). Work may also be boring, dangerous, or demeaning (Mundlak, 2007). It is *decent* work—that is, work that respects the human rights of the worker—that is a necessary component of a strategy to eliminate multi-dimensional poverty, as well as a key aspect of human dignity.

Since the turn of the Millennium, the elimination of global poverty has been a top priority of the international community. In 2000, the leaders from 189 nations committed, in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, to work together for poverty eradication, human rights, and global peace. Toward these ends, the Declaration was translated the following year into eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and 18 targets that aimed to unify governments, international organizations, foundations and civil society to focus expertise, efforts and funding on achieving these targets in the areas of poverty reduction, education, gender equality, health, and other aspects of human development. Yet, the original 2001 MDG framework failed to take into account a key element of poverty elimination and human development, namely, full employment and decent work. Although a new target on full employment and decent work was added to the MDG framework in 2007, it was late in the MDG process and had several shortcomings.

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The MDGs expired in 2015, and the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established for post-2015 agenda appear more promising. Goal 8 of the SDGs calls for full and productive employment and decent work for all, and some of the targets for this goal set a deadline of 2030. Additional targets and indicators for Goal 8 also have some positive features, including links to the ILO monitoring mechanisms. Nonetheless, there are some serious flaws with the goal and its targets and indicators, which make it inconsistent with international human rights standards. Full employment and decent work are international human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), among other international instruments, and the SDGs should, at minimum, align with the UN members' correlating obligations under international law. Ideally, the development agenda would be directed to realize the human rights—such as the rights to food, housing, education, health, gender equality, and decent work for all—to which the United Nations and its member states have committed themselves.

This article reflects on the shortcomings of the MDGs and considers the SDG on decent work and its potential in the post-2015 framework to bring sustained efforts toward ensuring decent work as a means to eradicate poverty and realize human rights for all. Following this introduction, Part II considers the meanings of full employment and decent work as those terms have been defined by the United Nations and particularly by the ILO and the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN CESCR). Part III examines the MDGs and targets, providing a brief history, a summary of human rights-based critiques, and then a more detailed focus on the positive and negative aspects of the full employment and decent work target. Part IV examines the SDGs, targets and indicators, providing a brief history, and some human rights-based concerns, particularly with respect to the SDG on economic growth, full employment, and decent work. The article concludes that linking the SDGs with ILO and human rights monitoring mechanisms would help to bring the international development, labor, and human rights regimes into sync and, thereby, provide a more coherent and effective path to eradicating poverty and realizing human rights.

The primary aim of the article is to show the gap between the human rights obligations to which countries have voluntarily committed themselves and the international development agendas that they have adopted in the form of the MDGs and the SDGs. Methodologically, the article falls in the discipline of law and specifically in the area of international human rights law (Van Hoeke, 2011). It assumes that countries—and inter-governmental organizations composed of countries—should act in conformity with their international legal obligations and that divergences from international law are noteworthy for at least two reasons. First, scholarship identifying non-complying policy and practice contributes to the legal discourse that interprets the law and

establishes what is within the law and what is not. Second, such scholarship may influence the operationalization of the SDGs in a manner that furthers, rather than circumvents, international human rights standards. Overall, the article seeks to contribute to the international legal scholarship on human rights and the MDGs/SDGs—or more broadly, human rights and human development—that is, wrestling with the convergences and incongruencies between two fields that would ideally cooperate more fully toward the common aim of improving human well-being (Alston, 2005; Bedggood & Frey, 2010; Darrow, 2012; Langford, 2010; Langford et al., 2013; MacNaughton & Frey, 2010; Pogge & Sengupta, 2015; Uvin, 2004; Vizard, 2006).

International Norms on Full Employment and Decent Work

The goals of full employment and decent work for all are central purposes of both the United Nations and the ILO, and most countries are members of both organizations. Moreover, both organizations have developed detailed standard for full employment and decent work and these align with each other in most respects. Furthermore, both organizations have established multiple mechanisms for technical assistance, monitoring, and accountability for advancing decent work for all (ILO, 1999; UN CESCR, 2006).

The ILO was established in 1919, and has been addressing unjust work and social conditions for almost 100 years. There are now 186 countries that are members of the ILO. The preamble to the ILO Constitution recognizes that “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice” (Constitution of the International Labour Organization, 1919). It further states that labor conditions of injustice, hardship, and privation for large numbers of people threaten the peace and harmony of the world. Consequently, the members of the ILO agree that “improvement of those conditions is urgently required” (Constitution of the International Labour Organization, 1919). These principles were re-affirmed in the Declaration of Philadelphia adopted by the ILO in 1944 and again in 2008 with the adoption of the Declaration on Social Justice for Fair Globalization.

Key to the development of international norms for “decent work” is the ILO *Decent Work Agenda*, a soft-law initiative adopted in 1999. The agenda proposes to focus the ILO's (1999) work around four strategic objectives or pillars: (a) rights at work, (b) fostering employment, (c) social protection, and (d) social dialogue. The ILO explains each of these four pillars as follows:

1. Rights at work: This pillar incorporates the ILO 1998 Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at work, which established four core labor standards based on ILO conventions. ILO member countries are bound to respect these standards by virtue of their

membership in the ILO even if they have not ratified the underlying conventions. The four rights are as follows: (a) freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, (b) the elimination of forced or compulsory labor, (c) the abolition of child labor, and (d) the elimination of discrimination in employment (ILO, 1999).

2. **Fostering employment:** This pillar requires that ILO (1999) member countries establish national policy goals and strategies to achieve full employment and appropriate pay for work as the key means of poverty reduction.
3. **Social protection:** This pillar requires ILO member countries to establish national policies for the prevention of work-related injuries and illnesses, prevention of oppressive working conditions, such as overly long work hours. It also requires paid holidays and protection in the form of social security for sickness, old age, disability, unemployment, pregnancy and other conditions that may limit the ability to work (ILO, 1999).
4. **Social dialogue:** This pillar requires members to support tripartite consultation, negotiation, and agreements between workers and their employers at every level of society from the workplace up to national level consultation as a means to include worker voice and resolve conflicts peacefully (ILO, 1999).

The *Decent Work Agenda* was cemented into the core of ILO policies, when the ILO adopted the 2008 Declaration on Fair Globalization. The Declaration institutionalizes the *Decent Work Agenda* and its four pillars as the framework for all ILO work (ILO, 2008). As such, the ILO is the leading global expert on the concept of full employment and decent work, which has since been adopted into the work of many UN agencies, programs and funds (UNDP, 2015; United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2005b).

In addition to the ILO system, the goals of full employment and decent work are central to the purposes of the United Nations, which was established in 1945. The United Nations aims to promote “higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress” as well as “universal respect for, and observance of, human rights” (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, art. 55). Under the Charter of the United Nations (1945, art. 56), all 193 members of the organization pledge to take action to achieve these purposes. The human rights enshrined in the Charter are detailed in the UDHR, which recognizes specifically that “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, art. 23). The UDHR also details several specific work rights, including the rights to equal pay for equal work, to just and favorable remuneration adequate for human dignity, to social protection, to rest and leisure, to

limitations on work hours, to holidays with pay, and to join and form trade unions (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, arts. 23-24). The United Nations-based legal regime thus frames decent work as a multi-dimensional human right (Bedggood & Frey, 2010).

The rights in the UDHR apply to all UN member countries, and they are further detailed in subsequent international human rights treaties that apply only to those countries that have ratified them. Two main treaties implement the human rights in the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Together these three instruments are known as the International Bill of Human Rights. The ICESCR is the most comprehensive treaty with respect to the right to decent work (Bedggood & Frey, 2010). In addition, it is the most widely applicable, as it applies to all people in the 164 countries that have ratified the treaty as of December 15, 2015 (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). The ICESCR recognizes four work rights that mirror and bolster the four ILO Decent Work pillars.

1. **Article 6:** This article protects the right to work, which is the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain a living by work that is freely chosen. States that ratify the ICESCR must “take appropriate steps to safeguard this right” (ICESCR, 1966, art. 6.1). The non-exhaustive list of steps includes adopting policies and techniques to achieve steady economic, social, and cultural development and full and productive employment under conditions safeguarding fundamental political and economic freedom (ICESCR, 1966, art. 6.2).
2. **Article 7:** This article establishes that everyone has the right to just and favorable conditions of work, fair wages, and equal remuneration for work of equal value; in particular, women are guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men (ICESCR, 1966, art. 7(a)(i)). Just and favorable conditions of work also include a decent living for workers and their families, safe and healthy working conditions, equal opportunity for promotion, the right to rest and leisure, periodic holidays with pay, and reasonable limitations on work hours (ICESCR, 1966, art. 7(b)-(d)).
3. **Article 8:** This article protects the rights of everyone to form and join trade unions (ICESCR, 1966, art. 8(1)(a)). It also protects the rights of trade unions to function freely, including the right to strike (ICESCR, 1966, art. 8(1)(b)-(c)). Limitations on trade union rights are permitted only if “necessary in a democratic society in the interest of national security or public order or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others” (ICESCR, 1966, art. 8(2)).
4. **Article 9:** This article recognizes “the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance” (ICESCR, 1966, art. 9).

Table 1. Elements of the Right to Decent Work for All.

ILO decent work agenda pillars	ICESCR work rights
A. Rights at Work	
1. Freedom of association	Article 8: Union rights
2. Elimination of forced labor	Article 6(1): Freely chosen work
3. Abolition of child labor	Article 10(3): Protection of children & young people
4. Elimination of discrimination	Article 2 & 7(a)(i) Non-discrimination
B. Fostering Employment	Article 6(2): Full employment & Article 7(a)(i)-(ii): A decent living
C. Social Protection	Article 7(b): Workplace safety, (d): Reasonable working hours Article 9: Social security
D. Social Dialogue	Article 8: Union rights

Note. ILO = International Labour Organization; ICESCR = International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The human rights and ILO systems are linked through the work of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), which is responsible for monitoring implementation of the ICESCR. The Committee looks to the ILO's work to elaborate on the elements of the work rights in the Covenant. In 2006, for example, the Committee issued General Comment 18 elaborating on the right to work in Article 6, drawing on ILO conventions. The Committee defines decent work as work that respects the human rights of workers, including the rights to work safety and remuneration adequate for workers to support themselves and their families (UN CESCR, 2006). It also implies the right not to be unfairly deprived of employment (UN CESCR, 2006). In requiring valid grounds for dismissal from employment and the right to redress, the Committee drew upon ILO Convention No. 158 on Termination of Employment (UN CESCR, 2006). The Comment requires state parties to have a national strategy for full employment but provides no requirements, guidance, recommendations or even suggestions for what might be required in such a strategy, nor any level of unemployment that might violate the Covenant (UN CESCR, 2006).

In 2008, the Committee issued General Comment 19 elaborating on the right to social security in Article 9. The Comment recognizes that social security, including a basic income and comprehensive medical care, are enshrined in both the Declaration of Philadelphia of 1944 and the UDHR of 1948 (UN CESCR, 2008). Nonetheless, it notes that 80% of the global population still lacks access to formal social security (UN CESCR, 2008). The Comment re-affirms that state parties have an obligation to provide adequate health care services for all and cash benefits to those incapable of working due to sickness, old age, inability to obtain or maintain suitable employment, employment injury, maternity leave or disability (UN CESCR, 2008). Violations of the right to social security include the failure to put into effect policies designed to implement the right (UN CESCR, 2008).

During 2015, the CESCR adopted General Comment 23 on the right to just and favorable conditions of work under Article 7. The General Comment re-affirms the interdependency of work rights, including the right to freely chosen work, trade union rights, the right to social security and the right to safe working conditions (UN CESCR, 2015). The General Comment refers to many ILO conventions that are applicable to specific categories of workers; however, it re-affirms that the "right to just and favourable conditions of work is a right of everyone, without distinction of any kind" (UN CESCR, 2015, para. 6). In this way, the CESCR universalizes ILO convention rights into human rights for all. Most importantly, the Comment emphasizes that austerity measures to address economic crises that claw back advances and erode international labor standards, including collective bargaining and working conditions, provide insufficient protection for workers under the Covenant (UN CESCR, 2015).

To date, the Committee has not issued a general comment on union rights under Article 8. Nonetheless, it has recognized the importance of these rights to the realization of all other work rights, including the right of workers to earn a decent living for themselves and their families (ICESCR, 1966, art. 11). In addition, some work rights are specified under other articles of the ICESCR. For example, Article 10, on the protection of the family as the fundamental unit of society protects children and young persons from economic and social exploitation and working women with paid leave and social security before and after childbirth.

Examining both the human rights and ILO concepts of full employment and decent work for all, as shown in Table 1, it is evident that there is a convergence in many respects on the elements of decent work. Moreover, the monitoring mechanisms in both systems have made efforts to ensure that they reinforce, rather than conflict, with each other. As a result, there is a general conceptual and accountability framework for decent work from the UN system that precedes the MDGs and the SDGs and should therefore provide a foundation for

Table 2. The Millennium Development Goals (2001).

Goal 1	Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
Goal 2	Achieve universal primary education
Goal 3	Promote gender equality and empower women
Goal 4	Reduce child mortality
Goal 5	Improve maternal health
Goal 6	Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
Goal 7	Ensure environmental sustainability
Goal 8	Develop a global partnership for development

the goal, targets and indicators in this area. This article therefore uses this combined normative framework as the basis for assessing the MDG and SDG agendas to determine whether UN members are acting consistently with their international legal obligations.

The Millennium Development Goals

In 2000, the leaders from 189 nations adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration vowing to work cooperatively to achieve peace, poverty eradication and human rights (UNGA, 2000). The Declaration's commitments echoed the obligations of the countries under the United Nations Charter to take joint and separate action with the United Nations to promote higher standards of living, full employment and "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights" (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, arts. 55-56; UNGA, 2000, paras 3-4). Although the Declaration incorporated commitments from several of the UN world summits of the 1990s, more importantly, it was intended to "breath life" into efforts to measurably and tangibly achieve them (Alston, 2005, p. 756). Measurable progress in achieving the goals would be accomplished through a specific set of goals and targets drawn from the Declaration, which would unify donors, governments, international organizations and civil society (Alston, 2005).

The original MDG framework promulgated in 2001 included a nested hierarchy of eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators (United Nations Millennium Development Goals [UN MDGs], 2003). As shown in Table 2, the goals set out in the MDGs recognized many inter-related facets of poverty reduction, including health, food, education, and gender equality, but surprisingly, for the most part, overlooked decent work and its link to poverty. Two work-related issues were included in the targets and indicators. First, one of the indicators for Goal 3—promote gender equality and empower women—was "Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector" (UN MDGs, 2003 Indicator 11). Second, Goal 8—develops a global partnership—included a target on decent work for youth (UN MDGs, 2003, Target 16). This target had the corresponding indicator "unemployment rate of young people aged 15 to 24 years, each sex and total" (UN MDGs, 2003, Indicator 45).

The MDGs had positive impacts on many of the dimensions of poverty for a variety of reasons. They were derived

from the Millennium Declaration, which enjoyed tremendous legitimacy because 189 leaders of nations had approved it (Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2009; UNGA, 2000). Second, the MDGs focused international development energy, expertise, and funding on a limited number of targets (Alston, 2005). Third, the MDG framework created a transparent system of accountability by incorporating specific time-bound and measurable targets and indicators (Alston, 2005). In addition, new international institutions supported and reinforced the MDG goals and targets by monitoring and reporting on their progress (Alston, 2005). Ultimately, the MDGs created a unified global development framework.

Nonetheless, the MDGs were also sharply criticized. Despite echoing obligations that states have under the Charter of the United Nations, the UDHR, and human rights treaties, the MDG framework sidestepped rather than aligned with human rights obligations. More damning, the MDG framework failed to abide by core human rights principles. For example, (a) the selection of goals was made by the global north and imposed on the global south (lack of participation), (b) the goals failed to address inequality and marginalized groups (lack of attention to equality and non-discrimination), (c) some indicators failed to measure progress toward their targets (lack of transparency), and (d) the goals failed to address poverty in high- and middle-income countries (lack of universality) (Langford, 2010; MacNaughton & Frey, 2010; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2008). In addition, many of the targets disregarded specific international human rights obligations, such as aiming to reduce poverty by half rather than eliminating it (ICESCR, 1966, art. 11(2); Pogge, 2004; UN CESCR, 1999).

Also, the lack of a goal or target on "decent work for all" in the 2001 MDG framework—as the international agenda to eradicate poverty—was curious (MacNaughton & Frey, 2010), and there have been divergent explanations for its absence (Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2009; Hulme, 2007; Rogers, Swepston, & Van Daele, 2009; van der Hoeven, 2014). Nevertheless, from the early 2000s, the ILO initiated a campaign for inclusion of decent work for all as a ninth MDG. The ILO already had a role in MDG monitoring and reporting on the target and indicator for decent work for youth and the indicator on women's share of non-agricultural employment (ILO, 2003). The ILO Director-General argued, however, that decent work was a missing link in global efforts at poverty reduction and that the ILO was prepared to be a full partner on the larger poverty reduction agenda. Its campaign to expand its role and influence began with the Director-General's 2003 report *Working Out of Poverty*, which argued that the development of decent work and the four pillars of the *Decent Work Agenda* provide the essential means, and the ILO had essential expertise and experience, to achieve poverty reduction (ILO, 2003).

In addition, the ILO established an independent World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization,

which issued a 2004 report, *A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All*, finding that the goals of full employment and decent work had received inadequate recognition in international policies but should be the foundation to make globalization fair and urged the prioritization of decent work (ILO, 2004). The report was formally adopted in a UNGA (2005a) resolution calling for the consideration of decent work at the World Summit in 2005. As a result of this resolution, full employment and decent work were placed on the agenda for the 2005 World Summit MDGs review. The momentum from ILO efforts led to a partial success at the 2005 World Summit where leaders adopted a resolution committing to include full and productive employment and decent work as a central objective of poverty reduction strategies to achieve the existing MDGs (UNGA, 2005b). The resolution did not, however, create a ninth MDG as the ILO had hoped. A subsequent inter-agency consultation resulted in the addition of a new target on full employment and decent work. The new Target 1B aimed to “achieve full and productive employment for all, including women and young people” (United Nations Secretary-General [UNSG], 2007, Annex II, pp. 66-67).

The addition of the 2007 decent work target was an important achievement and opportunity to focus attention on the role of full employment and decent work as key means of poverty reduction. Yet, despite its inclusion, there were several problems with the new target. First, unlike the other MDG targets, there was no deadline set for achieving it. Second, the United Nations’s action plan for achieving the MDGs had already been completed by 2005 and so there was no practical plan of action developed on achieving decent work for all (United Nations Millennium Project, n.d.). The addition of the decent work target in 2007 simply came too late for decent work to be an important feature of the international agenda to reduce poverty. Third, as with the other MDG goals and targets, the decent work target was divorced from international human rights treaties as well as ILO conventions and the monitoring mechanisms established to oversee implementation of international work standards (Darrow, 2012; van der Hoeven, 2014). In addition, the four indicators selected to monitor progress toward the new decent work target focused exclusively on the income dimension of decent work, rather than encompassing all four ILO Decent Work Agenda pillars (ILO, 2009).

In sum, the adoption of the new target and indicators on full employment and decent work in 2007 was in one sense a major step forward—but this was primarily a symbolic gesture as the infrastructure and plan of action for achievement of the MDGs was already finalized in 2005. Moreover, the indicators were entirely insufficient to measure progress toward either the ILO or the human rights standards for full employment and decent work (MacNaughton & Frey, 2010, 2011). Strikingly, as the *2015 Millennium Development Goals Report* indicates, there were 4 times as many people unemployed in 2015 than there were in 1991 (United Nations

Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2015). This means that more than 204 million people were unemployed in 2015, including 74 million young people (UN DESA, 2015). In addition, there were 1.45 billion workers in vulnerable employment (UN DESA, 2015). The report provides evidence that despite the addition of the decent work target in the MDGs, the world has fallen distressingly short of fulfilling the right to full employment and decent work for all.

The Sustainable Development Goals

A global discussion on the successor to the MDG framework began several years before the 2015 expiration date of most of the MDG targets. At the 2012 Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (Rio+20), the UN member states agreed to establish a process to develop new international development goals to succeed the MDGs. The Rio+20 Outcome Document, *The Future We Want*, called for an Open Working Group composed of 30 representatives of member states to decide on the methods of work to ensure full participation of stakeholders from civil society, the scientific community, and the United Nations system (UNGA, 2012). In addition, the UN Development Group led a global consultation process, organized by thematic interest groups, and a global conversation through an electronic survey, national and regional civil society and business consultations, and academic and scientific consultations (UNSG, 2014). As the Secretary-General (2014) remarked, the global consultation on the SDGs was “unprecedented” (para. 19).

Many of the criticisms that the human rights community raised about the MDGs—including the lack of universality, participation, transparency, equality and non-discrimination, and accountability—were central in the global consultation. Importantly, the Rio+20 Outcome Document maintained that sustainable international development and poverty eradication policies must be consistent with international law and respect for human rights (UNGA, 2012). The Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 agenda re-affirmed this commitment to grounding the new goals and targets in respect for human rights (*Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Development Agenda*, 2013). The Secretary-General also emphasized that the future we want must be free from poverty and built on human rights (UNSG, 2014). Civil society highlighted the need for human rights to be at the center of the post-2015 development agenda (“Joint Statement,” 2013). Finally, the UN human rights treaty bodies called upon the international community to integrate human rights obligations into the post-2015 development framework with specific human rights indicators and with oversight by national and international human rights mechanisms (Chairpersons of the UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, 2013).

Importantly, the global crisis of 2008 and its ruinous impact on employment gave the ILO a wide opening to

Table 3. Sustainable Development Goals.

Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
Goal 8: <i>Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</i>
Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation
Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries
Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable
Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
Goal 15: Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss
Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels
Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

promote decent work as key to the post-2015 agenda. Accordingly, the ILO played a more central role in the global consultation on the SDGs than it had on the MDGs. It held a co-chair position with UNDP (2013) on the UN Development Group's thematic consultation on Growth and Employment. It also provided technical assistance to the co-chairs of the UN Open Working Group of the UN General Assembly on the Sustainable Development Goals, which appointed a thematic cluster on employment, decent work, and social protection. In addition, ILO field offices participated in national and regional consultations (ILO, n.d.). Although non-governmental organizations (NGOs), workers, and trade unions continued to advocate for a stand-alone goal on full employment and decent work through 2015, the final SDG framework was disappointing. Table 3 sets out the 17 SDGs.

Goal 8 provides "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (UNGA, 2015, 19). It is laudable that full employment and decent work have risen from a target in the MDG framework to a goal in the post-2015 agenda. From a human rights perspective, however, the goal is problematic for several reasons. First, the goal appears promotional unlike other goals that demand achievement of specific human development outcomes. For example, Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 on poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, water, and sanitation, all aim to *end*, *ensure*, or *achieve* specific human development outcomes, whereas Goal 8 merely *promotes* full employment and decent work. In this respect, the MDG target on full employment and decent work at least aimed to *achieve* this human right rather than simply *promote* it.

Second, Goal 8 links full employment and decent work to economic growth. This linkage is problematic for several

reasons. First, the human right to full employment and decent work is not conditioned on economic growth. There are many steps that governments may take toward realizing full employment and decent work even in the absence of economic growth. For example, several countries have implemented employment guarantee policies precisely because a lack of economic growth has resulted in the lack of employment opportunities (UNDP, 2010). Notable examples include President Roosevelt's New Deal Public Works Programs, which employed more than 8.5 million people in the U.S., and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which offers 100 days of employment to rural households in India (Harvey, 2013; UNDP, 2010). Argentina, Botswana, Chile, Korea, Morocco, Peru, and many other countries have also instituted work programs to create employment (UNDP, 2010). Indeed, it is in times of economic downturns and in regions suffering from lack of growth that state obligations for the human rights to full employment and decent work are most important (MacNaughton & Frey, 2015).

Third, evidence indicates that economic growth does not necessarily result in the realization of the rights to full employment and decent work. Indeed, research indicates that, at least in some cases, it is more likely that the opposite causal relationship exists. A report by the New Economics Foundation (Martin, Meadway, Onaran, & Guschanski, 2015) shows that for nearly all European countries, economic growth is wage-led, meaning that a boost in worker incomes has greater impact than corporate investment on economic growth. Moreover, the goal of limitless economic growth is increasingly questioned due to environmental and resource limits and, thus, it may be more appropriate to frame full employment and decent work in reference to policies that create an enabling environment for its achievement

without requiring economic growth (Fukuda-Parr, 2015). Iyanatul Islam (2011) of the ILO Employment Policy Department maintains that what is needed is “an intellectual roadmap for the attainment of full employment and decent work” (p.77). By this, Islam draws attention to the need to rethink current macroeconomic policy orthodoxy and its impact on full employment. In contrast to the ambiguous link to economic growth in Goal 8, what is needed is an independent and coherent policy to ensure achievement of full employment and decent work whether or not there is economic growth.

Fourth, the enmeshment of full employment and decent work with economic growth in Goal 8 appears to be a step back from the MDGs. In the MDGs, the target on full employment and decent work was clearly recognized as a valuable human development objective for both its intrinsic and instrumental value. In that respect, it was consistent with international law on the human right to full employment and decent work. In the SDGs, however, full employment and decent work appear as potential byproducts of economic growth. In that respect, the linkage in Goal 8 between economic growth and full employment and decent work conflicts with the international human rights obligations of the UN member states. Indeed, universal education and health care, gender equality, and food security have all been stalled in the past on the grounds that economic growth was a necessary condition to achieve them. Such arguments can no longer be sustained, as there are many examples of countries that have implemented successful human development programs in the context of low or no economic growth. In sum, by taking a market-oriented perspective, full employment and decent work have been down-graded in the SDGs from fundamental human rights necessary to human dignity to dividends of economic growth despite the lack of evidence showing such a causal relationship. At best, economic growth may serve as an important means to human development—and the realization of the right to decent work—but is not, or should not be, the goal of development (UNDP, 2015).

The 12 targets for Goal 8, as set out in Table 4, are both promising and concerning. On the positive side, Target 8.5 states, “By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.” In contrast to the MDG target that had no deadline, the SDG target on full employment and decent work sets 2030 as a deadline consistent with other SDG targets. It is not clear, however, whether the quantitative benchmark of Target 8.5 is 100% employment for women, men, including young people and people with disabilities. Moreover, the target would require a minimum of six indicators to measure progress toward the achievement of all its subcomponents.

Other Goal 8 targets, including Targets 8.6, 8.7, and 8.8, as shown in Table 5, address the elimination of child labor,

the eradication of forced labor, the protection of labor rights, and the promotion of safe work environments. In these respects, the targets address many of the elements of the human rights to full employment and decent work. However, most elements of these targets contain no quantitative benchmark and few have specific deadlines. In addition, it would appear that Target 8.5—“achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all”—would encompass all of the elements of decent work set out in Targets 8.6, 8.7, and 8.8, provided that the meaning of “decent work for all” in Target 8.5 is consistent with ILO standards and human rights legal obligations.

A more coherent approach might have been to align the targets for the decent work goal to the four pillars of the ILO Decent Work Agenda, as recommended by the worker and trade union stakeholder group in the 2014 dialogue with the co-chairs of the UN Open Working Group (*Major Groups and Other Stakeholders Dialogue With the Co-Chairs on SDGs*, 2014). This approach would have connected the targets easily to the ILO and human rights monitoring mechanisms, ensuring multiple avenues for accountability within the UN human rights and ILO systems. It also would have ensured that the ILO *Decent Work Agenda*, including all four pillars were implemented through the post-2015 global development agenda. The four-pillar approach also would have facilitated the selection of indicators by encouraging at least one indicator for each ILO pillar of decent work (MacNaughton & Frey, 2016).

The SDG framework adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 set out only the goals and targets for the 2030 agenda. Indicators for the framework have not been part of the broad global consultation but are being selected by a group of experts and will be released in early 2016. Notably, the current proposal includes only four indicators to cover the 12 multi-dimensional targets for Goal 8. Moreover, the four indicators, as shown in Table 5, do not reflect the multi-dimensional concept of full employment and decent work as embraced by the ILO or enshrined in international human rights law. Indicator 57 states, “ratification and implementation of the fundamental ILO labor standards and compliance in law and practice” (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015, p. 163). This indicator is commendable in that it correlates precisely with the “rights at work” pillar of the ILO *Decent Work Agenda* and also ties into the ILO monitoring mechanisms. Indicator 56 is consistent with the MDG framework with its focus on addressing high rates of youth unemployment. The other two indicators do not measure progress on achieving full employment and decent work. As a result, the four proposed indicators are wholly inadequate to measure the multiple components of Targets 8.5, 8.6, 8.7, and 8.8 for which NGOs, labor unions, and workers advocated in the global consultation on the SDGs.

In sum, the importance of full employment and decent work to the eradication of poverty, the elimination of hunger,

Table 4. SDG 8 Targets, Comments, and Critiques.

Targets	Comments and critiques
Target 8.1: Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7% gross domestic product growth per annum in least developed countries	Economic growth target
Target 8.2: Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labor-intensive sectors	Aims at fostering employment No quantitative benchmark No deadline to achieve it
Target 8.3: Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services	Aims at fostering employment and improving social protection No quantitative benchmark No deadline to achieve it
Target 8.4: Improve progressively, through 2030, global resource efficiency in consumption and production and endeavor to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, in accordance with the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, with developed countries taking the lead	Aims at improving patterns of consumption and production and therefore is more appropriately a target for SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Target 8.5: By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value	Aims at fostering employment, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue No quantitative benchmark (unless “full” is 100% employment) Deadline of 2030
Target 8.6: By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training	Aims at fostering employment No quantitative benchmark Deadline of 2020
Target 8.7: Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025, end child labour in all its forms	Aims at achieving rights at work Quantitative benchmark of zero No deadline, except for ending child labor deadline of 2025
Target 8.8: Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment	Aims at achieving rights at work and social protection No quantitative benchmark No deadline to achieve it
Target 8.9: By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products	Aims at fostering employment No quantitative benchmark Deadline of 2030 is for policy not human development outcome
Target 8.10: Strengthen the capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and expand access to banking, insurance and financial services for all	Aims at fostering employment No quantitative benchmark No deadline to achieve it
Target 8.a: Increase Aid for Trade support for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, including through the Enhanced Integrated Framework for Trade-Related Technical Assistance to Least Developed Countries	Economic growth target
Target 8.b: By 2020, develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization	Aims at fostering employment No quantitative benchmark Deadline of 2020 is for policy not human development outcome

Note. SDG = Sustainable Development Goals.

Table 5. Proposed Indicators for SDG 8.

Indicator 54	GNI per capita (PPP, current US\$ Atlas method)	Economic growth indicator
Indicator 55	Country implements and reports on SEEA accounts	Economic growth and environmental impact indicator
Indicator 56	Youth employment rate, by formal and informal sector	Fostering employment
Indicator 57	Ratification and implementation of fundamental ILO labor standards and compliance in law and practice	Rights at work

Note. SDG = Sustainable Development Goals; GNI = gross national income; PPP = purchasing power parity; SEEA = system of environment-economic accounting; ILO = International Labour Organization.

and the improvement of health and well-being—indeed all the human development SDGs—warranted a stand-alone goal on full employment and decent work. By combining decent work with economic growth, the SDG framework adopts a market-led model of development that fails to put people at the center of the post-2015 agenda. Moreover, to be consistent with the UN member states' obligations under international human rights law and the ILO *Decent Work Agenda*, the decent work goal should have been implemented through four targets each related to one of the four pillars of the ILO *Decent Work Agenda* and measured by one indicator for each of the four targets. This approach would have brought policy coherence to the agendas of the ILO, the UN human rights system, and the 2030 global development agenda.

Conclusion

The SDGs and targets are impressive in many respects. The 3-year global consultation with a wide spectrum of stakeholders from around the globe was, as the Secretary-General stated, unprecedented. Such transparency and participation in the development of global policy meaningfully addressed serious concerns with the selection of the MDG goals and targets. Furthermore, the goals and targets do not propose half measures, such as halving those who live in poverty or halving those suffering from hunger. Instead, consistent with international human rights obligations, they aim to end all poverty in all its dimensions (UNGA, 2015). In this respect, the goals and targets are universal. They are also universal because they are applicable to all countries, not just to developing countries, as poverty and hunger are problems in both high- and low-income countries. Furthermore, many of the goals and targets address issues of gender equality and non-discrimination on the basis of age and disability. In addition, Goal 10 is a stand-alone goal to reduce inequality within and among countries (UNGA, 2015). Thus, the SDGs also address the concerns of the human rights community that the MDGs failed to align with the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Finally, the SDGs and targets take initial steps toward linking the development agenda to existing mechanisms of accountability with the proposed indicator on the ratification of the ILO conventions underlying the core labor standards, as well as a stand-alone goal (Goal 16) on

the promotion of access to justice and effective institutions of accountability. In sum, the SDGs are more in line with the human rights principles of universality, transparency, participation, equality and non-discrimination, and accountability than the MDGs.

Still, the opportunity to fully ground the 2030 development agenda in the international human rights framework, entrenching human rights principles and standards in a global strategy for development was sadly lost. The goals are not framed in terms of international human rights standards, the targets—with few exceptions—do not link to international human rights mechanisms for accountability, and the indicators are to be selected by a group of technical experts working behind closed doors. In the end, governments, international organizations, civil society, and funders will be working to make progress on these indicators, which have not been part of the global consultation. Finally, the 2030 international development agenda incorporates a market-based framework—as shown, for example, in Goal 8 linking decent work to economic growth—that in many respects is not consistent with the international human rights obligations to which nations around the world have committed themselves. In the absence of a human rights-based approach, it is unlikely that we will reach the SDGs by the target date of 2030.

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